

My Brush with History

“We Heard the Shots ...”

Aboard the Press Bus in Dallas 40 Years Ago

by Sid Davis

“I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of the President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. So help me God.” It was 2:38 p.m. Central Standard Time, Friday, November 22, 1963, when Lyndon Johnson, right hand raised, repeated those words in a stuffy, cramped compartment aboard USAF 26000, Air Force One, in Dallas, Texas. Nearby, President John F. Kennedy’s body lay in a bronze casket. His widow stood next to Johnson.



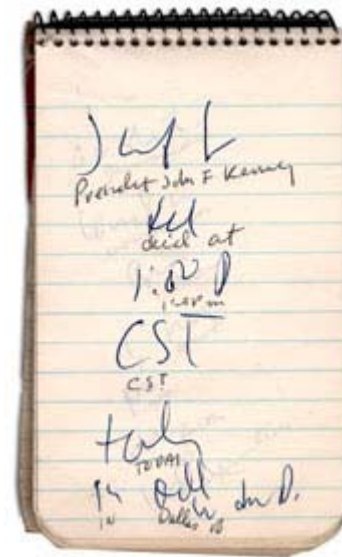
Standing on the trunk of a car, the author briefs the press about the swearing-in ceremony.

(AUTHOR’S COLLECTION)

Less than three hours earlier, Vice President Johnson and President Kennedy were cheerfully campaigning in downtown Dallas. The 46-year-old Kennedy and his glamorous wife, Jacqueline, were in the rear seat of an open limousine; the Texas governor, John Connally, and his wife, Nellie, sat in front. On orders from President Kennedy, the plastic bubble-top had been removed from the dark blue Lincoln Continental and Secret Service agents had been forbidden to ride on the car, as they usually did. The President wanted the crowds to see him and Jackie. The vice-presidential limousine carrying the Johnsons followed directly behind.

I was about seven car lengths behind the presidential limousine aboard Press Bus Number One, among a score of White House correspondents who regularly accompanied the President on the road. I represented the Westinghouse Broadcasting Company.

Suddenly, at 12:30, three rifle shots burst out. We heard the shots aboard our press bus. Some thought they were motorcycle backfires, but Bob Pierpoint, of CBS News, insisted it was gunfire. The commotion in the crowd, police officers running with pistols drawn, parents shielding their children revealed the worst. Something terrible had happened. The presidential limousine put on speed until our bus could not keep up. The driver took us to the Dallas Trade Mart, where several thousand people were waiting to hear the President's luncheon speech. I raced for a phone and filed a report saying that the presidential motorcade had been fired on. Then I ran into the street, waving my Olivetti portable typewriter to flag a car. A white Cadillac swerved over and screeched to a halt. A black gentleman looked out at me. He had heard the news. "You a reporter?," he asked. "I'll get you to the hospital." We took off like a rocket.



In the author's notebook, he deciphers his own hurried scrawl.
(AUTHOR'S COLLECTION)

Merriman Smith, "Smitty," of United Press International, the famous dean of the White House Press Corps, Charles Roberts of Newsweek, and I attended the briefing at 1:33 p.m. at Portland Memorial Hospital where Assistant White House Press Secretary Malcolm ("Mac") Kilduff told us the President was dead. Mac had met with Johnson in the emergency room a few minutes earlier, asking permission to announce Kennedy's death. Johnson said to wait until he had left the hospital: "We don't know whether it's a communist conspiracy or not. I'd better get out of here and back to the plane." As soon as Johnson departed, Mac dashed to the crowded nurses' training room where we reporters were waiting.

Red-eyed and choked by grief, he struggled to speak. "President John F. Kennedy died at approximately 1:00 p.m. Central Standard Time here in Dallas," he said. "He died of a

gunshot wound in the brain.” We ran for the phones. It was bedlam. While we were filing, Smith, Roberts, and I were nabbed by a White House official, Edwin Fauver, who told us we were to be the pool reporters who would witness the inauguration on Air Force One on behalf of all the members of the press in Dallas. We were herded to an unmarked police car, then driven through Dallas’s streets at speeds of up to 70 miles an hour, running red lights, heading for Love Field, where the swearing-in was to take place. Police-car radio silence was being maintained in case there were conspirators about, but we heard a headquarters transmission that a suspect had been apprehended in a theater.

At Love Field a hearse from Oneal’s Funeral Home was parked beside Air Force One. Secret Service agents and Kennedy aides had just finished loading the 800-pound casket into the rear of the plane. The agents had deliberately ignored a demand by the medical examiner’s office that the body be taken to the local morgue; instead, agent Andy Berger, driving the hearse, had sped directly from the hospital to the airport. Mrs. Kennedy, who rode with the casket, had made it clear: She would not leave the hospital or Dallas without the President’s body.

The plane had been sitting under a glaring sun, its shades drawn. The cabin was stifling as we stepped aboard. We found Johnson, his wife, Lady Bird, and others waiting in the presidential conference room amidships. I counted 27 people crowded into the compartment. Many were close Kennedy staffers—Kenny O’Donnell, Lawrence O’Brien, Dave Powers, and military aide Maj. Gen. Ted Clifton—and some were Johnson’s friends, Jack Valenti and Bill Moyers among them.

On the phone with the Justice Department earlier, Johnson had been told by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, the President’s brother, to take the oath before getting airborne. Federal District Judge Sarah Hughes of Dallas had been summoned. Johnson asked an aide to see if Mrs. Kennedy would stand with them. From her vigil beside the casket, Mrs. Kennedy sent word that she wished to attend but needed a few minutes to compose herself.

She entered the compartment, still in the two-piece pink wool suit she had worn in the motorcade. Johnson took her gently by the hand, placing her to his left. Mrs. Johnson stood on his right. The room fell silent. Mrs. Kennedy stood with her eyes wide, unblinking. I saw heavily congealed blood on her stockings, blood caked on her right hand and on her skirt.

The heat was suffocating. Johnson asked for and was given a glass of ice water, more ice than water. Army Capt. Cecil Stoughton, the White House photographer, standing on a chair, his back against a bulkhead, struggled to fit everyone into the official photograph, while Mac Kilduff crouched, holding a microphone. Kennedy’s personal Bible had been found on the plane. Johnson placed his left hand on the book and raised his right. Judge Hughes administered the 36-word oath, adding, “So help me God.” I clocked the ceremony at 28 seconds. The President turned, kissed Mrs. Johnson, then kissed Mrs. Kennedy on the cheek. “The whole nation mourns your husband,” Mrs. Johnson told Jackie. Johnson clasped the hands of Kennedy’s grieving secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, and

fended off any congratulations. Outside, one engine had been idling. Air Force One's pilot, Col. James Swindal, cut in all four. "Now let's get airborne," President Johnson ordered.

Roberts and I were told there were only two seats left on the plane for press. Smitty would stay because he was a wire-service man; Roberts and I would have to flip a coin for the remaining seat. I said I'd get off. I wanted to broadcast the swearing-in story as soon as I could after giving the pool report. Judge Hughes was in tears as we went down the stairway. She spoke of Kennedy's service to the country, and she told me he was the President who had appointed her to the federal bench. Halfway down I heard Smitty shouting at me from the hatch. "The President was sworn in at 2:39 P.M. CST," he yelled. But I had noted the time as 2:38 p.m. on my chronograph.

Colonel Swindal taxied to a far end of the field and turned sharply onto the runway. Quivering under full throttle, its four fanjets screaming, Air Force One lumbered past us, then hurtled upward on its mournful journey. "Wheels up" came at 2:47 P.M. CST, 2 hours and 17 minutes after the shots had been fired. Mrs. Kennedy returned to the rear compartment and sat with the casket throughout the flight, wearing her blood-stained suit. According to Roberts, when an aide suggested that she change into fresh clothing, Mrs. Kennedy replied, "No. Let them see what they've done."

As Air Force One headed home, the press corps arrived at Love Field. I was lifted onto the trunk of a shiny white car to deliver the first word of the swearing-in. From my notes I gave the time of the ceremony as 2:38 P.M. CST, and all the news services used that as the official time. Later that night, when I arrived back at the White House press room, Smitty was waiting for me in a fury. "You son of a bitch," he screamed, "I said the time was 2:39!" It took weeks for my lese majesty to be forgiven.

With compassion and resolve, Johnson brought the country together over the next weeks and months. The orderly transfer of power on that chaotic November 22, aboard Air Force One, was—and remains—a testimonial to the strength of the Constitution and of our country.

It was 4:22 a.m., Saturday, November 23, when President Kennedy's body arrived at the White House in a Navy ambulance following the autopsy at the Bethesda Naval Hospital. Scores of mourners stood silent outside the White House gates. Black mourning crepe had been hung over the North Portico. Bowl-like lanterns lined the driveway, flickering in the night chill. A Marine honor guard marching in funeral cadence led the ambulance carrying the casket and Mrs. Kennedy toward the portico, where members of the other armed forces were represented. In the East Room, a black catafalque, similar to the one used for Abraham Lincoln, awaited Kennedy's casket.

I was broadcasting the arrival with my Westinghouse colleague Ann Corrick. I had covered Kennedy from his 1960 election through the debacle of his Bay of Pigs decision, his triumph in the Cuban Missile Crisis, to Dallas. Now he was gone. I chose, unwisely, to close the broadcast with a verse from Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy

Evening,” a poem often quoted by President Kennedy at the end of his speeches during his presidential campaign:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

In tears, I was unable to finish it.

—Sid Davis, a lecturer and writer, was White House correspondent for the Westinghouse Broadcasting Company in 1963 and served later as vice president and Washington bureau chief for NBC News. He is a former guest scholar at the Brookings Institution.

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